

BBC

DOCTOR WHO



A story by Amelia Williams



SUMMER FALLS

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About the Book

‘When summer falls, the Lord of Winter will arise...’

In the seaside village of Watchcombe, young Kate is determined to make the most of her last week of summer holiday. But when she discovers a mysterious painting entitled ‘The Lord of Winter’ in a charity shop, it leads her on an adventure she never could have planned. Kate soon realises the old seacape, painted long ago by an eccentric local artist, is actually a puzzle. And with the help of some bizarre new acquaintances – including a museum curator’s magical cat, a miserable neighbour, and a lonely boy – she plans on solving it.

And then, one morning Kate wakes up to a world changed forever. For the Lord of Winter is coming – and Kate has a very important decision to make.

Summer Falls

Amelia Williams

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1954

*‘When Summer Falls,
the Lord of Winter will arise...’*

Chapter

1

It was the last week of the summer holidays, and Kate was in a temper. She banged around the kitchen until her mother told her to stop.

‘Why, Kate, why?’

Kate sighed. She was sighing a lot lately. ‘Because, Mother, you are so untidy.’

Kate’s mother glanced around the kitchen, and she knew her daughter was right. It was still full of packing cases, with half-washed dishes drying on cardboard boxes. ‘I am not untidy!’ she said hotly. ‘I’m really going to get this sorted out. This morning. Probably. Now, it’s a lovely day – why not go play down by the shore?’

‘I would rather stay in and help you.’ Kate did not like starting one thing before another was finished.

‘Just... go off and have fun.’ Her mother flicked her with the one tea towel that had so far come to light.

Kate stood outside the house. It was a pretty, old cottage with roses growing up to the thatched roof. It was all very nice, but it did not feel like home. The estate agent had explained that the old owner’s possessions had not yet been cleared out. Kate’s mother had vowed ‘Don’t worry, we’ll soon have it shipshape,’ and then done nothing about it.

Kate sighed. She made a resolution not to sigh any more. It was not getting her anywhere, and Kate did not believe in pointless activity.

She looked down the hill at the small town of Watchcombe, itself a jolly little monument to pointless activity. Twice a day a steam train deposited holidaymakers from the camp in the next bay, and they filled the winding streets, buying sweets and postcards and ordering teas. The beach was already scattered with families walking up and down in the sunshine, from the pontoon to the lighthouse and back – and, if they were speedy, doing it again for luck. Rowing boats set out from the small harbour – they went out a short way, did nothing much and came back. It all seemed quite pointless, and yet Kate could hear everyone calling happily to each other.

Kate could not see how they felt. ‘Seven days,’ she thought to herself glumly. A whole week until school started. New home, new town, new school. So much uncertainty. Kate was determined to Get Something Done in the little time she had remaining. Seven days, although the bright morning was nearly gone already, so she would have to adjust it to six-and-a-half.

Kate thought about walking into town and perhaps catching the next train. She jingled the coins in her pocket and considered this as an option. True, Minehead had a better stationers, but buying a new rough book was simply admitting that, no matter how hard she tried to prevent it, School Was Going To Happen.

It was at this point that something unplanned occurred. It was the first in a series of unplanned

events that would change Kate's life completely. A grey cat ran across the front lawn and paused, staring at her, about to vanish into the hedge.

Kate did not own a cat. She rather wanted one. As the cat appeared to be waiting for her, she made an exception to her rule of no unplanned activity, and followed it. It slipped nimbly through the hedge, and Kate pushed after it, with a little more difficulty than the cat, it is true. There was a moment when the branches crammed in around her and she wondered if she was stuck, and then she fell forwards, like a cork from a bottle, onto the grass. At the feet of a man.

'Hello,' he said. 'What brings you to my lawn?'

'Well,' Kate's mother had taught her to be unapologetic, 'your cat was trespassing in my garden. I am returning the favour.'

'That's a fair point,' admitted the man, helping her up. 'Although it's not really my cat. Cats don't belong to anybody.'

Kate studied the man. He was tall, thin and friendly. She caught herself hoping he taught at her new school. If he did, she decided, she'd like school a bit more. 'I'm Kate Webster,' she said. 'How do you do?'

The man laughed and bowed. 'Then you are welcome to my grass, Kate Webster.' The cat weaved around their legs. The man bent down to scratch its ears. 'I say, Kate Webster,' he offered. 'Do your ears want scratching, too?'

Kate shook her head. 'Who are you?' she giggled.

To her surprise the man shrugged. 'Not anyone, really. I'm just looking after the museum for a friend. I guess you could call me the Curator. How does that sound?' He looked at her eagerly.

'Not very good,' admitted Kate. 'Don't you have a name?'

'I'm between names at the moment.' The man looked sheepish. 'I am having a holiday from them.'

'Can you do that?' asked Kate.

'I'm seeing how it works out,' admitted the Curator. 'Do you really think I need one? What do I look like? A Montmorency or a Keith?'

'How about Barnabas?' suggested Kate. It was the name of her teddy bear, and she thought more things should be called Barnabas.

'Barnabas!' The Curator seemed delighted. 'Never tried that one. Let's give it a whirl. Tea?'

He led her down the side of the house (which seemed very nice, if a little boarded up) to the back, where some garden furniture was arranged around a large, striped canvas tent. The man vanished inside it, coming out with a tray heaped with cups, plates, scones and ginger pop. He rested it gently on the paving by the cat, which was cleaning itself.

'Why do you keep your kettle in your tent?' she asked.

'Oh, that's not a tent.' Barnabas had adopted the air of a man with a great secret. 'Inside there is my shed. It's undergoing repairs.'

That seemed an odd thing to say, but Kate's grandfather was very protective of his shed. Perhaps Barnabas was the same.

'I would give you the guided tour, but it's not finished,' he said, confirming her suspicions as he handed her a plate. 'Cheese scone. With sultanas in. I changed my mind halfway through.'

The cat looked at Barnabas wearily, and then sniffed the milk jug.

Tea went rather well. Barnabas listened to Kate's plan to Do Things before the end of the holiday and sagely suggested she draw up a timetable. He said that, if nothing else, it would take a while to

do. 'Failing that,' he said, 'you could pop into my museum.' He caught the look on her face. 'It's really very nice. Though not on Wednesdays. I close it and spend the day going up and down on the steam train. I like trains.'

Kate wasn't entirely convinced.

'Don't you like it here?' The Curator sniffed. 'How odd. The 1950s aren't that bad, and this is a charming town. The kind of place you want to settle down and open a little shop with an e. I love a little shoppe. Have another scone.'

As Kate left Barnabas's house, the grey cat watched her go. It looked on the point of saying something, but then, like most cats, it never quite got around to it.

Kate stood in the lane, brushing crumbs from her pullover. The church clock struck noon. She was happy that she'd achieved something with her morning. A cool breeze swept in from the sea, reminding her that summer was nearly over. She walked down the lane, wondering if she could make friends with the boy next door before lunchtime. That'd really make something of the day.

It wasn't an unqualified success. The boy next door was sat outside the garage, mending a bike badly. He was quite handsome, but looked very sad. His misery increased when he caught Kate looking at him.

'Hello,' she said. 'You're Armand, aren't you?'

'Yes,' the boy scowled. 'But you probably shouldn't make friends with me, you know.'

'What?' Kate seemed genuinely puzzled. 'Is it because you're Indian?'

'No!' Armand laughed. 'They're all right about that. No...' He paused, sadly. 'It's because my father kills people.'

'Oh,' said Kate. She wondered what else to say. By the time she'd thought of something, a little too long had passed. Armand flushed, and went back to work. She stood there awkwardly, watching him mend his bike, and then went home for lunch.

Chapter

2

She waited until halfway through the tinned soup. ‘Mum,’ she asked, ‘Does the man next door really kill people?’

Kate’s mother gave her The Look. Clearly, there would be no help there.

Kate set herself an afternoon goal. She would find out what was going on, which sent her on a mission to Watchcombe. Armand’s father worked at the pharmacy, so she decided on going there to buy soap or a fishing net. It was an old shop in the market square, its windows lined with yellow cellophane. Stood outside were two women, both giving the appearance of great bustle while standing still for a decent gossip. Kate lingered next to them, turning a critical eye to homes for sale in the window of the estate agent.

‘Well,’ tutted one to the other, ‘I really shouldn’t stop, as I must get some fishcakes for Arthur’s tea.’

‘Allerdyce is using more bread in ’em than he should,’ said the other.

The first nodded. ‘His batter’s not fit neither,’ and she thinned her lips. ‘Not since his Lucy went away.’

‘Oh this town,’ the second clucked, and gave a significant glance at the pharmacy. ‘Not what it was. Not what it was.’

‘Old Miss Doyle is the latest. Natural causes, they said. But we know better, don’t we?’

‘Oh yes,’ the first put in. ‘No smoke without fire.’ Satisfied, she turned away from the pharmacy and trotted down the street.

Kate went into the pharmacy, and rifled through a display of fishing nets and plastic spades. Next to this, an old dog slept in a basket. Behind the counter, a distinguished Indian man was handing a wrapped paper package to a severe-looking woman.

‘Your prescription, madam.’

‘Splendid. Thank you.’ The woman made to put it in her shopping basket and then hesitated. ‘I’m sure it’s all in order, Mr Dass, but I was just wondering if Mr Stevens would mind checking?’

The paper bag hovered between them. Mr Dass’s smile hung in place. ‘It is precisely your prescription, Mrs Groves.’

She did not move. ‘All the same...’

Mr Dass’s smile lost its grip and fell from his face. With a startling suddenness, a twinkling old man burst from the back of the shop, heading off the explosion by plucking up the paper bag and opening it. ‘We’re only too happy, only too happy, Mrs Groves,’ the little man laughed, holding the pill bottle up to the light. ‘All in order. Don’t take more than two, now, will you? We can’t be too careful, can we?’ He gave her the package, and this time it vanished into Mrs Groves’s shopping

basket.

With a cheerful ‘Thank you, Mr Stevens,’ she left the shop with a tinkle.

Mr Dass turned to his employer, his tone tight. ‘I do wish you had let me handle it, sir. There was nothing wrong with the prescription.’

‘Oh, absolutely not.’ Mr Stevens beamed.

‘There never has been anything wrong with any of my prescriptions. And...’ Mr Dass’s voice was rising. ‘And I will not have it said... that there has been any mistake on my—’

Quick as smoke, Mr Stevens slid under the counter, and wrapped himself around Kate’s shoulder. ‘Now then, little girl, what have we here? You’d like to make some lovely sandcastles, wouldn’t you?’

A minute later, Kate found herself standing outside the shop, holding a plastic bucket that had cost more than she’d wanted to pay, and for which she had no real use. Kate did not see the point of making something the sea would only wash away.

She went into a charity shop, and tried to give them the bucket. ‘Never used,’ she insisted.

The jolly woman behind the counter was having none of it. ‘That’s one of Mr Stevens’s, that is. We can’t accept it. That,’ and her tone was severe, ‘would be taking trade away.’

Thwarted, Kate glanced around the shop. It was dingy, full of lace and candlesticks and incomplete jigsaws. In the corner was a cardboard box. The jolly woman’s beady eyes saw Kate looking at the box. ‘Ooh, that’s from poor Miss Doyle’s cottage, that is. Heaps of stuff to come from her place, my duck. Her nephew drove down just to turn his nose up at it, he did. “It’s all junk,” he told me, “and you’re welcome to it.” Terrible shame – she had a lot of local objets d’art. Your Mr Stevens, now he’d appreciate it. You have a look through, my dear, you’ll find yourself a treasure. All in aid of the Orphans of Africa.’

Dutifully, Kate poked miserably through the box. It contained some small pottery owls glued to a pebble, a snow globe of the lighthouse, a jar of coloured sand... and a painting. At first she didn’t like the picture at all. It showed the harbour, with dark seas crashing against the lighthouse. In the foreground were two odd figures. A man was holding a bright gold ring, and a woman had a large key. Kate was about to put it back among the paperweights and souvenirs when her fingers brushed against the surface of the painting. ‘It’s wet!’ she gasped.

‘Ah.’ The jolly woman frowned. ‘Miss Doyle’s cottage did let in the damp something dreadful. Mind,’ she brightened, ‘if it’s in the walls, her nephew’ll have a devil of a job letting it to holidaymakers.’ Cheered by this bad news, she let Kate take the painting home at a discount, and consented, just this once, to taking Mr Stevens’s bucket off her hands. For the orphans.

‘Frightful!’ exclaimed Kate’s mother when she saw the painting. ‘Take it to your room and clean it later.’ She made Kate wash her hands twice before sitting her down to tea on a dining table cluttered with newspaper-wrapped plates. ‘I’ve not made much progress,’ sighed her mother. ‘I just got so tired I had to have a nap.’

Kate’s mother’s life was ruled by naps. Good news, bad news, hard work or lack of work, all resulted in a little nap. Lately there had been a lot of bad news, and a considerable number of naps.

Kate pushed the corned beef spaghetti bolognese around her plate and told her mother all she had achieved. Mum brightened at the news that she’d made friends, but frowned slightly when she heard

that she'd talked to Armand Dass. 'I mean,' she said, 'I'm not one to listen to gossip...'

Kate changed the subject to Barnabas, and her mother took a sudden dislike to her daughter having tea with strange men who lived in their sheds. 'He sounds peculiar company,' she muttered. 'But then again, a lot of people who look after museums are, I suppose. Never could stand the places. All about what's past and what's not to come. Still,' she considered, 'if it fills in a morning, perhaps you should pop in tomorrow.'

No expert in art restoration, her mother sent Kate up to clean the painting with a jam jar full of washing-up water and an old toothbrush. Kate covered the painting with suds and dabbed at it gingerly.

By the time she had finished, the water had gone from a light green to a thick black. The painting still felt wet – and her fingertips tingled. Almost like touching cotton wool.

When Kate slept that night, she dreamed she was somehow running across the sea, desperately trying to reach the lighthouse, but the waves heaved and towered around her. And something... something dark was following her.

Kate woke up, her heart pounding. She sat up in bed, gasping. Her room felt terribly cold and crammed full of menacing dark corners and nameless terrors hidden behind the neatly stacked crates. She was sharply aware that something was watching her... something... and her eyes fell on the window. Sat on the sill, gazing at her intently was Barnabas's grey cat. Despite herself, Kate giggled. The cat blinked and cleaned a paw.

'Well,' said Kate to herself, 'there's no going back to sleep after that. May as well make the most of the night.'

'Goodness,' said Kate's mother the next morning. 'The living room looks wonderful. Clearly I managed a lot more unpacking than I thought yesterday.'

Kate stifled a yawn. 'I'll make you some breakfast.'

'Oh, would you?' Kate's mum sank into an armchair and drew her dressing gown around her. 'You're an angel! I always make such a mess of the frying pan.'

Kate found the cat in the lane. She thanked it politely. It stared at her, and seemed about to respond when a stone flew past its ear. The cat reared up and darted into a bush.

Kate turned around. Armand was standing there.

'What did you do that for?' she asked.

'Can't stand cats,' he said. He laughed, but there was something sheepish about him. Would quite like to be a bully, but was too much of a coward, Kate decided. 'You shouldn't be cruel,' she said. 'I've got something to show you.' She pulled the painting out of her satchel and showed it to him proudly.

Armand looked unimpressed. He ran a finger along it and shivered. 'What's it painted on? It feels weird. Is that mould? Throw it away.'

Kate had been hoping for a better response. She packed it back in her bag. 'Are you still mending that bicycle?'

Now Armand masked his sheepishness with anger. 'You wouldn't understand,' he snapped. 'The

chain's all sticky.'

'Yes,' sighed Kate, seating herself on the concrete in front of the corpse of the bicycle. She spun a wheel and considered it. 'The problem is that you've been greasing the chain with cooking oil. Fetch me a bucket of hot soapy water and let's see what we can do.'

Some time later, Armand had got used to watching her work. 'Have you always been like this?' he asked.

Kate considered the question and decided it was silly. 'It's like me asking if you've always been like you are.'

'I don't understand.'

'Well, I think you're actually nice. But you go to a lot of trouble not to be. Has that always been the case?'

Armand thought for a moment, then playfully splashed her with suds.

'That proves my point,' laughed Kate. 'You're trying to avoid answering. Is it because of the gossip about your father?'

Armand didn't try to hide his anger this time. 'You wouldn't understand,' he growled. 'Anyway, you haven't got any friends.'

'I haven't,' agreed Kate. 'But as I've only just moved to this town it would be unreasonable to expect me to have any. But I am sure I shall make some.'

'How?' asked Armand.

'By mending bicycles,' said Kate.

'This is quite a remarkable painting,' said Barnabas.

He had been working in his tent rather than in his museum. Kate found this odd, but was relieved to have been spared the walk.

'Can you tell me anything about it?' she asked.

Barnabas swept back his tangled hair and peered closely at the painting. He sniffed it curiously. 'You've cleaned it with washing-up liquid. And had cabbage for lunch,' he announced. 'Funny sort of canvas. Almost like tin foil.'

Kate nodded.

'Interesting. But ooh, feels like static electricity, doesn't it?'

Kate nodded again.

'If,' sighed Barnabas, 'static was a bit damp.'

They stared at the painting for a bit.

'I don't like it,' admitted Barnabas. 'It's by Mitchell. He was a local painter a long time ago. Supposed to have gone a bit loopy in the end. Curious.' He regarded it again solemnly.

'I think it's a puzzle,' said Kate.

'Oh?'

'Well, if you don't look at the sea and the sky, but just at the painting. At the top is the lighthouse. The man's holding a ring, the woman a key. They form a triangle. Perhaps it tells you how to find the objects.'

'I suppose it might.' Barnabas ran a thumb along the frame. 'Is this the title?'

Kate nodded. 'I tried cleaning it with an old toothbrush but can't make it out.'

‘A toothbrush, eh?’ Barnabas clucked disapprovingly and angled the frame to catch the light. Then his smile stopped and he looked solemn. ‘It’s called *The Lord of Winter*.’

‘What does that mean?’ asked Kate.

‘I don’t know.’ Clearly the Curator did. ‘Why don’t we pop down to the museum and look at this properly? Before doing anything. Like, perhaps, trying to solve the puzzle. Do nothing, yes? I say – you haven’t shown anyone else this have you?’

‘No,’ said Kate. ‘Only a friend.’

‘Oh well, that’s all right then,’ said Barnabas. He was suddenly all serious and old. ‘It’s just... I don’t think that painting’s very nice.’

The doorbell rang.

‘Can you get that, Kate?’ her mother called down. ‘I am having a nap.’

Kate ran to the door and opened it.

Standing there was Armand’s father, Mr Dass.

‘Hello,’ she said.

Mr Dass muttered something.

‘Would you like a cup of tea?’ she asked.

Mr Dass’s eyes darted about nervously.

Kate took him into the kitchen and put the kettle on the hob. ‘I am sorry about the mess,’ she said. She decided to use the time it would take the water to boil to learn new information. ‘We are still unpacking. And there are so many of Mrs Mitchell’s old things lying around.’

Mr Dass muttered again.

‘What was she like?’ Kate prodded while she located mugs.

Mr Dass stared at her.

‘She was your neighbour. Was she nice?’

Mr Dass eventually managed a whispered ‘Yes.’

‘Oh, I am pleased,’ said Kate, pouring milk into cups. ‘I don’t like to think of living somewhere someone unpleasant lived. I have her bedroom. It’s full of her books. There’s even some of her clothes in the wardrobe. Mum says we’ll clear it all out soon, but I daresay we won’t get around to it. We never really do. We should have done it before we starting unpacking, but we haven’t, so it probably won’t happen. Sugar?’

Mr Dass nodded. Kate worried that she was talking too much. She picked up her tea. It was too hot to actually drink, so she just pretended to sip it. She decided that if she made a little slurp it was quite convincing.

Mr Dass spoke. ‘I would like to buy your painting,’ he said.

Kate put her tea down. ‘Oh,’ she said.

‘I will pay twice what you did for it,’ he said.

‘The painting is not for sale,’ Kate was firm. ‘And, your son owes me an apology. I told Armand as a secret. How disappointing that he told you.’

‘That’s not important.’ Mr Dass waved a hand, and strode towards her. ‘I really must have that painting.’ He was standing quite close to her and breathing very hard.

Frightened, Kate wondered about running, but she was backed into a corner. ‘I do think I should ask my mother’s permission before making a decision,’ she said carefully, before calling ‘Mum!’

very loudly.

But Kate's mother showed no signs of coming.

Mr Dass smiled. It wasn't a nice smile. 'I think,' he said, 'you will fetch me the painting now.'

'No,' said Kate.

'Give me that painting.'

Mr Dass's hand clamped around her wrist.

Kate was about to shout for help when something grey streaked through the kitchen window at Mr Dass.

He reeled back, clutching at his cheek. The grey cat ran across the draining board, knocking over a mug.

Kate's mother appeared, rubbing sleep out of her eyes. 'You woke me up,' she yawned. 'And look at the mess you've made. Oh, hello.' She acknowledged Mr Dass with surprise.

'Your cat attacked me,' Mr Dass murmured.

'Oh no,' Kate's mother shook her head. 'We don't have a cat.' She paused. 'Do we?'

Kate, busy with a dustpan and brush, shook her head.

'Well, there we are then. So nice to have met you. That's quite a nasty scratch you've got. You should put a plaster on it right away. I would do it, but I've no idea where ours are.' Kate's mother swept Mr Dass out of the house and pottered back into the kitchen.

'Do we like him?' she asked. 'I don't think we do.'

Kate emptied the dustpan into the bin and hugged her mother. 'Thank you, mum. I do love you.'

'I see.' Kate's mother patted her head and yawned again. 'I was having such a strange dream. It was very cold and dark and...' Her eyes alighted on Kate's mug. 'Oh, you've made me a cup of tea,' she smiled. 'How thoughtful.'

That night, Kate dreamed again about the painting. She'd propped it up on the dressing table. It seemed oddly at home, surrounded by all Mrs Mitchell's dusty objects and old trinkets. Kate drifted off to sleep wondering who Mrs Mitchell was, and imagining what she was like. Kate was just deciding that, overall, Mrs Mitchell was a kindly woman, if a bit serious, when she slept, and the dreams of the painting came.

She was running up the steps round the outside of the lighthouse. They were frozen with ice and it was so cold. The steps wound up and around, up and around, but they didn't seem to end. And there was a noise – over the roaring of the sea and someone calling her name, there was a scratch, scratch, scratching...

Kate woke up. There was a scratching in her room. At first she thought of mice. Kate did not like mice. She flicked on the bedside lamp and dared herself to look at the source of the scratching. It sounded quite large, and she hoped it was not a rat. A mouse would be better than a rat, although still very hard to deal with. Perhaps she could just hide under the covers and hope that it would go away and...

Kate peeped. It was not a rat. Or a mouse. It was the Curator's grey cat. It was scratching at the floorboards and glancing at her. As though she should help.

Kate slipped out of bed. Her room was freezing. She crouched down next to the cat.

'What is it?' she asked.

The cat did not answer.

‘How did you get in here?’

The cat did not answer that either.

‘You want me to lift this floorboard, don’t you?’

The cat seemed to nod.

Hoping that there wasn’t a nest of mice under the floorboards, Kate tugged at it. It lifted.

Under the floorboard, snuggled under mounds of dust and old wiring, was a dirty old metal ring.

Kate lifted it up and caught it in the moonlight.

It was the ring from the painting.

Kate’s mother had said that she was only to be woken in emergencies. She had previously defined an emergency as the house being on fire, and not Kate discovering an interesting new word or even inventing a new colour.

Kate wondered if the present situation qualified as an emergency. She now owned a strange painting, one wanted by a man who may have been poisoning people. Kate wondered if Mr Dass had killed Mrs Mitchell. If so, was it because he wanted the ring she had found hidden under the floorboard? She remembered the Curator’s warning not to try and find the objects in the painting. But she hadn’t. It was all the cat’s doing. Mostly.

Kate had poked around the space between the joists again and discovered an old envelope. Written on it in a jumpy hand were the words ‘Keep it safe. He must not find what the Cold Lady holds.’ Was this the ring? And was the ‘he’ Mr Dass? Was the Cold Lady the woman from the painting? So many important questions.

But, on balance, these things had remained hidden for a long time so perhaps this wasn’t an actual emergency. Undecided, Kate stood outside her mother’s door and called her name a couple of times at a normal volume. If it really was an emergency, then fate would make sure that her mother woke up.

Her mother did not wake up, so Kate decided to go back to sleep. I’ll sort it out in the morning, she thought. At the foot of the bed was the painting, the ring lying on top of it, and the grey cat curled up, as if guarding them all. Kate slipped between the covers, feeling the cat warm against her legs. She slept.

Chapter

3

When Kate woke up, it was winter.

She didn't notice for a while. First she spotted the cat had gone. Then she realised how cold it was. She could see her breath fogging in the bedroom air. She got out of bed, startled at the icy chill of the floorboards beneath her feet. A hurried search for slippers was fruitless, and she raided Mrs Mitchell's wardrobe for a very old-fashioned winter coat that reeked of mothballs. She put on three pairs of mismatched socks and stomped downstairs.

Now above all, she'd like her mother to have made her a cup of tea. But there was no sign of her. Not in the kitchen, her napping chair, or even in bed. Perhaps she'd gone out. Kate peered out of a window.

It was at this point that Kate realised that it had snowed.

She looked at the snow. 'That's beautiful,' she breathed. 'But quite ridiculous. It's September the third.'

Despite her saying this, the snow stayed where it was. Inches of thick, proper, glorious snow, all the way down the garden, the road and into town.

'Interesting,' said Kate. 'No footprints. So either Mum went out before the snow or...'

But Kate couldn't work out what 'or...' would be. So she made herself a cup of tea and then went on the hunt for Wellington boots and gloves.

Kate crumped through the snow. It was all hers. All her life, she had wanted to be the first person to walk in the snow, but she had never managed it. No matter how early she woke up, someone had always got there first. But not now.

It may have been the last week of summer but already Kate had made two friends, found a painting and a ring, mended a bicycle, and been the first person to walk in the snow.

Kate rang Barnabas's doorbell. He wasn't in. She passed Armand's house. It seemed empty. She did not want to ring the doorbell as she did not feel in the mood to talk to either Armand or his father.

She walked down the road to find someone in the town. But all the streets she walked through were deserted. The houses were dark, the cars buried under snow. Even though it was daytime, the streetlights glowed faintly.

It was silent. Utterly silent. Which was when Kate realised what was wrong. The sound that was missing. She ran down to the harbour and stared.

The sea was frozen.

Kate stood, watching the sea for a long time. She'd never seen anything so impossible, so beautiful. She looked out at the waves frozen into mountain peaks, stretching towards a distant, dark sky, and she felt afraid. She was alone in a world that was a dream.

She thought she heard something. A distant shout, perhaps, echoing off the wall of water. She called out to it, but there was no reply. And then she noticed something.

There were prints in the snow. Tiny prints. Paw prints. She ran after them, her boots sinking deep into the snow, going past the tiny sailing boats stuck to the sea, past a row of cafés and an old inn... to the harbour wall. Sat on the wall, looking out to sea, ears perked up, was the grey cat.

It turned to look at her, unblinking. Kate had never been so glad to see anything in her life, and made to sweep it up. But it edged back.

‘Oh, cat,’ said Kate. ‘This is just impossible. I was upstairs. Asleep. Then this happened. It doesn’t make any sense. How can this have happened? Did someone do this?’

‘I did,’ the cat replied, much to her surprise.

That stumped Kate for a moment. Eventually, she said, ‘I have two questions.’

‘Go on.’

‘How can I speak cat?’

The cat yawned, considering. ‘It would be better to say that I can speak human. Next.’

‘And are you sure you did this?’

The cat nodded. ‘Oh yes. I suggested you bring together the painting and the ring.’

‘But why?’

‘I wanted to make sure you did it.’ The cat shrugged a paw. ‘I wanted to see what would happen.’

‘What? Why would you do such a thing?’

‘I am, after all, a cat.’ The cat nibbled at its claws thoughtfully. ‘I work for no one. I was just curious.’ It worried away at a tough bit of fur. ‘And I do rather want to meet the Lord of Winter.’

‘Who?’ Kate felt very much out of her depth.

The cat looked up, witheringly. ‘You are a slow purr. That’s what’s written on the frame of the painting. “When Summer Falls, The Lord Of Winter Will Arise.”’

‘But...’ Kate was annoyed – the cat had not answered her question, which was hardly playing fair. ‘Who is the Lord of Winter?’

The cat emitted a short yowl of exasperation. ‘I’m not going to tell you everything, young kitten.’ And, with a shake of its tail, it vanished over the harbour wall.

Kate ran forward with a gasp – but the creature hadn’t drowned. She could see it, darting between the icy foothills of the frozen sea, tail up, hunting.

As the snow fell, the town became more beautiful, still and silent. And yet Kate caught a sob starting at the back of her throat. Kate rarely cried. She plunged her hands into the snow on the harbour wall, feeling the chill spread into her bones. For almost the first time in her life, she had no idea what to do. Instead of coming out in their usual neat order, her thoughts were tumbling. She kept her hands pushed into the snow until her brain slowed down, until its one thought was ‘please can you take your hands out of the snow?’

Kate did and immediately felt a little better. She was alone. All the grown-ups had gone. The only thing alive was a talking cat. And someone was coming, this mysterious Lord of Winter. The sky seemed darker now than ever. Perhaps it was nearly night time. Did that make sense? When had she woken up? Kate walked to the lighthouse at the end of the harbour. Remembering her dreams, she reached for the gate to the metal steps. Normally the gate was padlocked and a polite notice asked people to keep out and not to fish from the pier. Both padlock and notice were gone.

This was an invitation either to open the gate or go fishing. Kate did not like fishing. The gate swung open with a creak, and she started up the metal steps. They wound up the building in a spiral, and she soon found herself breathless. As her heart started to thump in her chest she remembered her dreams. The steps had gone on endlessly, and something had been following her. She made herself stop and look back. Nothing was following her. And yet she felt as though the sky was watching her.

With a push, Kate made it to the top of the lighthouse, bursting out breathless onto the roof. The platform around the light was icy and she skidded into the rail, flailing against it. She had a moment of panic and terror, gazing into the sea below, and then dizzily sank down onto the platform, grabbing the railing.

This would not do. She stood up and faced the sea. It took her a while before she admitted that actually, she was just crouching, gripping the railing with both hands, but she was still trying. Up here, the silence wasn't so absolute – a cold wind tugged at her hair, and she could just hear a distant cracking and splintering, as if of breaking glass. This puzzled her for a minute, until she discerned that the frozen sea was not totally solid, its sudden hills shifting and bumping against each other.

She peered into the horizon beyond the sea. The bleached grey of the sunless sky was shadowed – was it a cloud drifting closer, or a ship or something else? She squinted, but couldn't quite see. Yet, in the distance, something dark was approaching.

Kate shivered, and not entirely with cold. She stood watching for a while, attempting to discern what it was, or how fast it was travelling. She couldn't tell – and yet, she did notice something else.

Kate heard the crying. It wasn't an animal or a bird – it was the sound of someone down below feeling thoroughly sorry for themselves. Well, she thought, there's someone other than me in town and they need cheering up. That's something.

She picked her way carefully down to the harbour. The sound was fainter on the ground, but she knew roughly which direction it came from. She clumped past the town's sad-looking Chinese restaurant, and down an alley. She found a set of footsteps and followed them. The crying grew louder.

She found Armand by the bins, slumped against an old shopping basket. He was shaking with tears. 'Oh hello,' she said, trying to sound casual. 'Fancy seeing you here.'

Armand looked miserable. She'd originally thought him older than her, but not now. He was no longer angry, arrogant, or distant – just thoroughly wretched. He blinked at her, but did not stop crying.

'Right then,' said Kate, and slipped off her coat. 'You're coming with me.'

Chapter

4

Gino's was the town's grandest café. It disdained day-trippers seeking cooked breakfasts and sliced ham. It preferred to serve creaking pensioners cheese scones and gossip. On any given day it was full of customers happily complaining to waitresses about old scores and tired bones. But now it was empty.

The door swung ajar. A slice of snow had pushed its way in. Kate swept it out before shutting the door firmly. She sat Armand down at a table with an artificial daffodil. She handed him a creased magazine, then went out to the kitchen to do battle with the gas stove. A couple of minutes later she brought them out two mugs of soup and some not-too-stale bread.

For a few moments, the two sat, sipping and staring at each other.

'Hmm,' said Kate.

Armand blew on his soup. 'Did you cause all this?' he demanded.

Kate was startled. 'Uh, no,' she said. 'I thought it was something to do with you. I mean, why else would you be here?'

'That's what I was thinking about you,' Armand retorted. He found some pepper, cascading it over his soup.

'How can you drink it like that?' laughed Kate.

'It's nice,' Armand replied. 'So you didn't do this?'

'A cat has claimed responsibility,' she said airily. 'Which is ridiculous. But you know the cat that belongs to the museum curator? It's here. And... it spoke to me... or, at least, I think it did and...' She trailed off. 'Pass the pepper, would you?'

Armand slid the pepper pot across the table.

They carried on drinking soup. Outside more snow fell.

'I suppose we're stuck here,' said Armand. 'I've tried calling the police, but the phones are dead.'

'They would be.' Kate finished the last piece of bread. 'We could try walking to the main road. But I think we're trapped here. Something's wrong with the world.'

'Did the cat tell you what's going on?' asked Armand.

'A bit.' Kate explained about the painting and the ring that the cat had found.

'I'm wondering if we're here because...' she thought about it, 'we both touched the painting.'

'So that third object – somewhere out there is a woman with a key?'

'I think so,' said Kate. 'We should start looking. Once you've finished your soup.'

Which is how they found Milo. He was a small, blond child wearing only a pair of swimming trunks. He was sobbing loudly.

'What is it about the boys in this place?' Kate allowed herself a sigh. 'Do they spend all their time crying?'

‘If he didn’t blub so loudly, we wouldn’t have found him,’ pointed out Armand.

‘True,’ admitted Kate.

Milo was curled up on the veranda of the bowling club. Cradled in his arms was a small, unhappy-looking dog.

‘I don’t like dogs,’ announced Kate.

‘Cat person,’ explained Armand.

‘Ah,’ Milo sniffed. His tears dripped onto his dog’s fur. The dog licked at them, a puzzled expression on his face.

Kate had heard that dogs were like their owners. Milo’s dog looked loyal, but confused by the world.

‘We were bathing on the beach,’ Milo said. ‘With Mum and Auntie Jean. We came from the holiday camp for the day. I drifted off to sleep in the sunlight with Brewster in my arms... and when I woke up... I was all alone, and it was cold and my towel was frozen and Mum is going to be very, very cross when she finds me...’ He considered his options. ‘So I ran away. But I want to go home. I want my mummy.’

‘Well—’ began Kate, but Milo forestalled further conversation with a bout of crying that showed no signs of stopping.

‘Fine.’ Kate broke into the bowling clubhouse. She emerged a few minutes later with an old jumper that smelled of spilt beer. ‘Put this on,’ she said, ‘otherwise you’ll freeze.’

She handed round some odd gloves she’d found in lost property. ‘There,’ she said. ‘Now we’re ready to go investigating.’

‘We are?’ Milo stared at her with saucer-eyes. ‘But when are the grown-ups coming? Aren’t we going to find some adults?’

‘Was I this bad?’ Armand asked her. Kate ignored him.

‘No,’ she informed Milo firmly. ‘We are on our own. There are no grown-ups here. Our only chance is to sort this out ourselves. Now, give me the key.’

Milo stared at her in confusion and alarm. And then burst out crying again.

Armand looked at her and smirked.

‘Right then.’ Kate banged a mug of soup down on the café table. Milo seized it gratefully and his sobs subsided. ‘This café is our Headquarters. We have a puzzle to solve and a key to find. Are you quite sure you haven’t got it?’

Milo shook his head, his teeth chattering. At his feet, Brewster lapped gratefully at a bowl of water. The dog seemed to be handling events rather well. Kate crouched down and stared into the dog’s eyes. ‘What’s going on, Brewster?’ she asked him. ‘It’s all right. You can tell me.’

The dog stared back at her, growled, and went on with drinking water.

‘What are you doing?’ Milo asked slowly.

‘She thinks she can talk to animals,’ Armand sneered.

‘That’s not true!’ Kate stood up with as much dignity as she could. ‘It was just the one cat that could talk.’

‘Can we go and find your cat?’ suggested Milo. ‘Brewster’s good with cats. He’s had some topper scraps with them.’

‘I’m sure he has,’ said Kate, ‘But it may not be the best way to interrogate the cat. It seemed to

have told me all it wanted to. It said that the painting was important.'

'Can I see it?' asked Milo. 'I'd be only too happy to.'

'I don't have it on me,' admitted Kate. How annoying. If only, she thought to herself, she had some kind of device that would fit in her pocket and take pictures and show them on a screen. Perhaps, she thought, she'd get around to inventing one. When she grew up. 'I'm afraid it's back at the house.'

'Along with the ring?' asked Armand. 'Isn't that a bit silly?'

'I'd not really thought about that,' agreed Kate. 'I mean, we're fine so long as we're the only people here.'

'I would like to see the painting,' said Milo. 'It sounds wizard.'

'Fine,' said Kate. 'I'll nip home and get it. Don't go anywhere. And leave me a little soup.'

Kate hurried across the harbour, snow biting into her face. The sky hovered just overhead, pressing down. She thought she could touch the clouds if she stood on tiptoe. Out across the sea, the darkness was spreading, the shadow getting closer. She could swear that there was less sea now – as though the world was closing in around them.

The wind whipped up, and Kate grasped the wall to steady herself. She'd hoped to be there and back in five minutes, but this was proving to be a struggle.

From nowhere, the cat leapt onto the wall, staring into her face, curious. Then it smiled.

'Hello, Kate,' it said. 'Things aren't going too well.'

'Tell me about it. This is your fault.'

'But I'm cold,' the cat complained.

'Well then, you shouldn't have caused all this.'

'I'm a cat,' it sighed. '*Je ne regrette rien*. Now, feed me and warm me up.'

So Kate picked the cat up and got ready to carry it home. It vanished inside her duffle coat and purred loudly.

'Oh.' Its head poked out. 'There's something you should know. Look down at the jetty.'

Kate looked down at the snow-covered decking. There were footsteps on it. They were not alone.

The house felt strange, ticking and creaking, chuckling at Kate. A window banged in the kitchen, startling her.

'Is someone in here?' Kate called out.

No answer.

'Mum?'

No answer.

Kate looked at the cat. 'What's going on? Is someone here?'

'They were,' the cat sniffed the air, 'But they left a few minutes ago. I don't think they found what they wanted.'

'How can you tell?'

The cat trotted to the front door. 'They came in this way. They smelled excited.' It shook a paw at the kitchen. 'They went out that way – and they smelled angry.'

'Ah. Were they looking for the painting?'

'Of course.' The cat found a bit of carpet and cleaned itself. 'But I hid it. You reek of dog, by the way. You should change your coat.'

‘You hid the painting?’ Kate exclaimed. ‘Where?’

The cat paused. ‘Stop asking me questions. When you interrupt, I have to start cleaning all over from the beginning.’

‘No you don’t, that’s silly.’

The cat looked at her pityingly. ‘Those are the rules of cleaning.’ It stuck its tongue out at her then went back to licking a paw.

‘So where’s the painting?’

Exasperated, the cat stood and trotted upstairs. ‘Fine, fine, I’ll show you. Then I’m going to clean myself thoroughly on this chair by the radiator.’

The cat led her to her bed and vanished under the covers.

Kate waited.

And waited.

Eventually she prodded the cat-shaped lump.

‘Ow,’ said the cat. ‘What?’

‘Where’s the painting?’

‘Ooops,’ admitted the cat. ‘Sorry. Totally forgot about that. Just having a little shuteye. It’s warm and dark in here. I’m sitting on your painting.’

Thinking how well the cat would get on with her mother, Kate drew back the covers. The cat was curled up on the painting and the ring. She picked them up.

‘Right then. I’ve got a world to save.’

She ran away.

‘Whatever,’ said the cat, watching her go until its eyelids became heavy and it went back to sleep.

The café was deserted. This was typical of boys. They never listened to girls and got bored easily. She could not understand it. There was, after all, plenty of soup left. Admittedly, it was minestrone, but still. Crossly, she realised the boys had not washed their mugs. Hiding the painting and the ring under a table, she washed up, and then set out.

It was getting colder. As she traipsed through the empty streets, the snow became heavier, pressing into her face. Every house front, every car was now buried. The only colour was the red of her gloves. Everything else was white. White apart from that dark stain spreading across the horizon, coming closer across the creaking mountains of the frozen sea.

Something fluttered in her stomach. Kate realised she was afraid.

Which was when she heard the phone ringing.

The trill echoed up and down the streets, drawing her closer and closer to a small building in the harbour. Kate stopped outside the door, rubbing her sleeve across the brass plate, clearing it of snow: ‘Watchcombe Museum.’ She pushed through, her boots thunderously loud on the boards after all that quiet snow.

She took three steps and gasped. The museum looked like someone had stuffed a bookshop into a junkshop into a boat into a church. Brass musical instruments hung from fishing nets looped through the rafters. Display cases shone with books and maps, stretching away into the furthest corners of the lobby and beyond. It was very impressive.

But what had made Kate stop were the wet boot prints ahead of her. They headed across the lobby, past a large waxwork of Queen Victoria and into a room full of stuffed bears and an Ormolu clock.

Kate swallowed and entered the room.

‘Hello?’ she called.

There was no answer, but the glass eyes of the bears stared at her. The phone continued to ring. She looked around, trying to see if anyone was watching her. Above her, a whale skull bit the air in two. The bell rang on. She ran through to the next room, which appeared to be mostly jigsaws. Still no sign of the telephone.

‘Answer it!’ she yelled. She knew she wasn’t alone. They may as well do something useful.

The next room contained a painting of the Battle of Waterloo and a reproduction of Drake’s cabin on the *Golden Hind*. Incongruously sat on the desk among the scrolls was a brass telephone.

She reached out for it.

The telephone stopped ringing.

Kate looked around herself and then kicked the desk firmly.

‘Right then,’ she called out at the top of her voice, ‘I know you’re in here. I know I’m not alone. Instead of being creepy you could have picked up, you know. It wouldn’t have hurt you. That was the real world, trying to help us.’

Nothing.

She called out again, louder. ‘Can you hear me? My name is Kate Webster and I am going to find you. And when I do, I am not going to be scared. I am going to be very cross indeed.’

Something moved in the next room. It was a small ball, rolling across the floorboards. She picked it up. It was wet.

‘Right,’ Kate threw it, and, as she’d expected, Brewster came bounding out from behind a desk, and brought it to her.

‘Milo,’ she said. ‘I have your dog. Come out now. Otherwise... I dunno.’ She glanced at Brewster, who looked back at her with adoration. ‘I guess I’ll end up making dog soup. Is that a thing?’

Sheepishly, Milo emerged from hiding, bringing a scowling Armand with him.

‘We thought,’ admitted Armand, ‘that it was someone else. Someone bad. We didn’t realise it was you. Then you started shouting at us—’

‘And then we *really* hoped it was someone else,’ finished Milo.

Kate glared at them.

‘That phone call could have been important,’ she seethed. ‘Could you really not bring yourselves to answer it, whatever the risk?’

Each boy hoped the other would say something.

‘I guess we were scared,’ muttered Armand.

Milo, gratefully, nodded. ‘And not thinking straight.’

‘Right,’ said Kate, and allowed herself a sigh. She really had a very low opinion of boys. And then a suspicious thought tugged at her. ‘Did one of you stop the other from answering the phone?’ she asked before she could stop herself.

The two glanced at each other guiltily.

‘No.’ Armand was quick.

‘I see.’ Kate knew it – she knew she was right not to trust Armand. The boy was definitely up to something. ‘Why did you come here?’ she asked.

‘It was my idea.’ Milo was proud. ‘I thought that, if we were trying to find this key, we should look for it in the museum. Museums are very useful places,’ he finished.

Kate had always considered museums to be a little dull. She liked this one, although she would have enjoyed spending a week putting it in a really good order.

‘And did you find anything?’ she asked.

‘I think so,’ said Milo. ‘We found an exhibition on the painter. He’s really very clever.’

The boys led her to a little annex that smelt of damp. Hung in it were several works by local artists, including several by the same hand. All were various views of the town in winter, and all were signed ‘Mitchell’. There was a small leaflet and a donation box. Kate, lacking any money, popped an old badge in there as an IOU.

Armand picked up a copy of the leaflet without even glancing at the donation box, and read aloud. ‘The last in a long line of Mitchells to have lived in Watchcombe, Mitchell painted a considerable number of scenes of local beauty before going away to serve in the Great War. He did not return.’

‘How sad,’ said Kate.

‘They’re jolly good, aren’t they?’ enthused Milo.

‘They look just like your painting, don’t they?’ said Armand.

‘Disappointingly.’ Truth to tell, Kate was starting to think of the mysterious Mr Mitchell as a bit of a one-trick pony. He liked painting sea, sunsets and snow. Over and over again...

‘Well, I rather like them,’ Milo said, crossly.

‘I’m sure they’re very nice if you like that sort of thing, but they’re all so alike,’ Kate mused.

‘So what,’ asked Armand triumphantly, ‘Makes the painting you’ve got so special?’

‘Good point.’ Kate blinked.

This started a whole new train of thought which crashed to a halt when the telephone rang again.

Chapter

5

Kate rushed to the room, pursued by the boys, and grabbed the receiver.

‘Hello? Hello? Hello!’ she gabbled.

‘Goodness, you sound like you’re having fun!’ came the voice at the other end.

‘Barnabas!’ she gasped. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Hoping someone would pick up the phone,’ came the answer. ‘Hello, Kate Webster, I’m glad it’s you.’

‘Where are you?’

There was a short pause. ‘I’m out of town,’ he said. ‘And, to be strictly honest, having more than a little trouble getting back in. But don’t worry. Help is on the way.’

‘You’ve called the police? The fire brigade? The coastguard?’

‘No,’ Barnabas admitted. ‘I’m help. I’m on the way.’

‘The town’s frozen, all the people are gone, and something bad’s happening. You’re just a museum curator. How can you help?’

‘Take a deep breath.’

‘What?’

‘It will calm you down.’

Kate took a deep breath.

‘Now,’ said Barnabas’s voice, sounding a long way away. ‘Here’s how I can help. What’s happening to the town has something to do with its past. And museums are all about the past. Which is where I come in. Hopefully. If I can get there in time.’

‘But—’ shouted Kate.

‘Deep breath!’ admonished Barnabas.

‘Deep breaths just allow me to shout louder,’ Kate informed him. ‘It’s all very well to know that you’re on your way, but please also call on a responsible adult.’

‘You don’t need a responsible adult. You need me. Listen—’

Kate realised she was the only grown-up in the world.

She hung up.

‘What did you do that for?’ gasped Armand.

‘He was being silly.’

‘Who was that?’ demanded Milo.

‘It was the museum curator.’

‘Who’s that?’ asked Milo.

‘My neighbour. This is his museum. He says he’s coming to help.’

‘Well, he won’t be able to.’ Milo looked serious. Tears were not far off. ‘We’re trapped here and we’re going to die.’

Kate braced herself to be comforting and the phone rang again.

This time Armand picked it up.

‘It’s for you.’ He offered her the receiver.

‘I know,’ said Kate.

‘He’s really very insistent.’

‘He’d better be.’

She took the telephone.

‘You hung up on me.’

‘I know.’

‘But why?’

‘It’s a very interesting museum,’ said Kate. ‘And you weren’t being very helpful.’

‘I see.’

There was a pause.

‘Right then. Your painting shows two objects. It’s like a treasure map. You just have to find the objects.’

‘Worked that out. Got the ring already.’

‘You did? I told you not to.’

‘I know. Your cat found the ring.’

‘Oh. Grey cat, funny whiskers, doesn’t laugh at jokes?’

‘That’s the one.’

‘Hmm. No tuna for him.’

‘And now we’re trying to find the other one. The key held by the lady.’

‘The Cold Lady,’ mused Barnabas.

‘What?’

‘I was about to tell you.’ Barnabas sounded annoyed. ‘Somewhere in my museum is an old poem –

When Summer Falls,

The Lord of Winter will arise

When darkness calls

And opens the Cold Lady’s eyes.’

‘Who is the Lord of Winter, anyway?’

‘Trouble. It’s why I’ve got to get there. And believe me, I’m trying.’ Over the phone came a small explosion and terrible grinding noise. Kate assumed this was Barnabas’s car.

‘You should be more careful changing gears,’ she informed him.

‘Thank you.’ Barnabas spoke through gritted teeth. ‘You’re proving quite hard to get to.’

‘We’re all alone. It’s just the three of us.’

‘We?’

‘Me, Armand, and a young boy called Milo, Oh, and his dog. Hurry. We’re running out of soup.’

There was another grinding of gears. Over this Kate heard the Curator tell her to ask his cat about the Lord of Winter and to be very careful about who she decided to trust.

Mind you, she thought, Barnabas must have been calling her from his car. This seemed an odd thing to her. Even in London there weren’t telephones in motor cars, were there?

‘Are you suggesting we search Watchcombe for this Cold Lady?’ wailed Milo. He looked miserable. Brewster was similarly forlorn.

‘Well, we’ve got to locate that key,’ Kate said. She was finding boys increasingly annoying and unconstructive creatures.

‘I think the key is in Mr Mitchell’s painting,’ suggested Armand.

‘Really?’ Kate wasn’t convinced. ‘All he does is paint the sea.’

‘Very nicely,’ put in Milo.

Armand persisted. ‘He also paints the lighthouse a lot. Why? I think it’s a clue.’

As they neared the lighthouse, Armand cooed triumphantly. ‘See! It looked different in the painting – the top of it was glowing.’

‘I don’t think Mr Mitchell would have got anything wrong,’ said Milo loyally. ‘Maybe it’s been a while since the lighthouse was working.’

The cat sidled past. Brewster growled and snapped at it, and the cat retreated up onto the lighthouse steps.

‘Wait!’ called Kate, running after it.

The cat turned to her with annoyance. ‘I am on patrol,’ it hissed through gritted teeth. ‘Do something about that dog, would you?’

‘But I have something to ask you. Barnabas says you can tell me about the Lord of Winter.’

‘Well, I could,’ admitted the cat, staring very intently at something only it could see. ‘The Lord of Winter is very old and doesn’t really belong here.’

‘But what is he? I mean...’ Kate tried to keep her eyes off the darkening sky. ‘I mean, is it even a he? I can’t see...’

‘I can’t describe the Lord of Winter to you!’ The cat sniffed the air disdainfully. ‘You can’t see the Lord of Winter, not yet. But you can hear him.’

‘Nonsense!’ Kate protested. ‘It’s completely silent.’

The cat stared at her pityingly.

So Kate listened. The only sounds were the distant wind, the creaking of the frozen waves... and a giant’s footsteps. Coming closer.

‘Oh,’ said Kate.

The cat nodded. ‘Better hurry up and find that key before he gets here,’ it said.

‘Come with us,’ she said.

The cat shook its head. ‘I won’t, thanks. Don’t like the dog.’ It trotted away.

They looked around the lighthouse without success.

‘This,’ said Kate, ‘was not a good idea.’

Armand was unperturbed. ‘Well, Mitchell also paints a lot of the nearby coves.’

Kate pointed out that she didn’t really fancy climbing over frozen rocks looking for a magic key.

‘I don’t think we have to,’ said Armand, simply. ‘You and I are here because we’re associated with the objects.’

‘I’m not,’ wailed Milo. ‘I’m from Leighton Buzzard.’

‘Ah yes,’ Armand was patient. ‘But you were sleeping on a beach. Maybe that’s where the key is.’

Comprehension dawned in Kate’s eyes. ‘So we just have to search the beach where Milo was sleeping?’ She suddenly thought Armand was quite clever.

Milo burst into tears. ‘I can’t remember where it was!’ he cried.

They headed out of Watchcombe. Armand offered to punch Milo until he remembered where he'd been. Kate did not think this was quite so clever.

The children split up, roving across the various headlands, trying to recognise the beach from Milo's memories. After what seemed an age, Milo gave a shout, popping his head up over the headland. 'I think... I think it's this one!'

They ran to him, scrambling down the hill path to the beach. Here, out of the snow and the wind, it almost seemed like summer again. They trod over iced rock pools clustered with frozen jellyfish. Brewster would pause and lick the occasional pond. The pebbles of the beach were frozen under foot. It was lethally hard to keep upright.

'I'm sure... I'm sure this is it!' exclaimed Milo. Brewster yapped excitedly.

Armand looked at Kate. He seemed nervous.

'Is anything wrong?' Kate asked him.

He shook his head. 'No... I don't think so. I just don't like it here very much.'

Kate shrugged. 'We don't have much choice.'

Armand looked around them. 'Do you know what the locals call this place? Skull Cove.'

Kate's eyes drifted around at the rocks above them. Two small caves high up... and another at ground level. If you squinted, it did look a little like a skull.

'Coo,' said Milo. 'I never saw that. Wow. Those caves would make smashing hiding places.'

'I don't like them,' said Armand. He seemed nervous.

'Well, true – those high-up ones look like an awful risky place to hide something. But what about the mouth? That seems easy enough. Let's go inside!'

'Steady on,' Kate put out a hand. 'You're younger than us, so you should stay outside. With Brewster. I don't want you getting into trouble. If anything happened to you, I'm not sure I could face being banned from Leighton Buzzard.'

Milo protested.

Armand looked glum. 'You want us to go into the cave?'

Kate tutted. It wasn't quite the same as a sigh, so it seemed allowable. 'Fine, scaredy-cat. I'll go on my own. You just look after Milo and Brewster. And if something attacks me, I'll try to keep my screams reasonably quiet.'

She was quite pleased with that, although, as she stepped towards the cave mouth, she felt a wave of panic rising in her. It was just so dark. And really did look like a mouth. Even a normally trickling stream was frozen into a snake's tongue. Her boots crunched on it.

Kate pulled out the torch she'd brought with her, and it flickered over the roof of the mouth. Thankfully there were no stone teeth clamping down on her, but it was all very oppressive.

She took another step and another. She kept talking to Armand and Milo, but the sound of her voice echoed back to her. She glanced back to the boys, and they seemed suddenly so far away. If she did panic, if something did happen to her, could she reach them in time?

She made herself take another step forward, wishing she had the cat with her. But Kate was alone. Utterly alone, completely —

She heard a noise ahead of her and something brushed her hand. Someone else was in the cave with her. She heard it make a groan, and that was quite enough. She turned, beginning to run, run out of the cave, back to safety.

Which was when she found that something was running into the cave towards her. A terrible,

snarling beast.

Chapter

6

Kate gasped in horror. The creature bearing down on her was Brewster, but somehow terribly transformed – slavering jaws and mad staring eyes. She backed away, crying out for help, and felt the torch knocked from her hand by the impact of the dog.

Ordinarily Brewster was quite an unassuming little dog. But now it was just a whirl of teeth and anger.

‘Help!’ she called, hoping for Milo, or even Armand to come to her rescue – but she could see no one at the cave mouth. Kate was on her own. The dog lurched towards her, and she fell backwards, the breath knocked out of her. All of her stung, the dog on her before she had a chance to get her senses back.

She felt something flowing down her neck. Oh, she thought, I’ve been bitten, I’m dying. And then she realised it was drool from the dog.

Brewster darted back, ready for another go. It reared up to spring, and as the dog did so, Kate grabbed the cave wall and launched herself towards the leaping hound.

The soles of her shoes caught Brewster, sending him spinning backwards, slipping helplessly on the ice.

Kate dragged herself up and ran past the dog, who was shaking himself with confusion. She pelted past him, making for the beach. She broke out into the meagre daylight.

‘Milo! Armand?’ she called. ‘It’s Brewster! He’s gone mad!’ But her voice echoed back off the empty beach. The boys had vanished.

Behind her she could hear snarling.

With no time to make for the path, she started to clamber up the cliff face, her bare hands already needle-numb from the cold. Brewster snapped at her heels, spurring her on. She made it to a little ledge, halfway up.

There was still no sign of Milo or Armand.

There was also no going back now. She inched her way along the ledge, reaching the side of the Skull Cove. Here there was a narrow path, little more than a track for rainwater, but it made the ascent slightly easier. By now the pain in her hands was biting – the higher she climbed, the more exposed it became and the colder she got. She shook her head and pulled herself on, further and higher, until she flopped over the top of the cliff. Her coat was cut by thorns, her hair was a mess and she was panting like she’d done cross country. But she felt an enormous sense of achievement.

When she stood up, she saw Armand and Milo standing there watching her.

‘There you are!’ she said, relieved. ‘Where did you go to? What happened to Brewster to upset him so?’

The two boys continued to watch her, blankly.

‘Something spooked him. One of you had better be brave enough to go and calm him down – I’m not up to it.’ She gave a little laugh.

Neither of the boys laughed.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asked them. ‘What’s happened? Milo?’

Milo stared at her, his eyes wide.

Her suspicions aroused, she turned on Armand. And she noticed something. He was nervous. Shaking. Afraid.

‘What?’ she said. ‘What have you done? You’ve done something horrible, haven’t you, Armand Dass? It’s just like you to let me down.’

Armand shook his head, slightly.

‘No.’

The firmness of Milo’s voice startled her. The little boy with the golden curls and the simple smile was transformed. His simple smile was now thin and cruel, his blue eyes no longer sparkled.

‘What’s happened?’ she demanded. ‘What’s Armand said to you?’

‘Nothing,’ smirked Milo. ‘Well, nothing except that he was only too happy to obey me. You see... Armand and I have an agreement. He has been working for me. He doesn’t even like you. I made him pretend.’ He grinned. ‘You thought you had a friend. Two friends. You don’t. You’re all alone. In my world.’

‘*Your* world?’ Kate was baffled.

‘My lovely world.’ Milo giggled. ‘I painted it. My name is Milo Mitchell.’

As Kate stared at the little boy, his features changed and shifted again, his body growing taller, his hair uncurling, the golden hue going grey. The skin on his face sagged and wrinkled, but the eyes still danced blue.

Milo Mitchell was suddenly Mr Stevens, the pharmacist.

Armand took a step back. Kate would have as well, but she’d have fallen off the cliff.

‘Isn’t it lovely?’ the old man laughed. ‘Oh, it’s been jolly fun being young again,’ he rubbed his hands. ‘Now, I bet you both have questions.’

Kate opened her mouth, but the man held up a hand.

‘I can guess! Yes, my real name is Milo Mitchell. Yes, I painted all those pictures, so very long ago. Yes, I was just a little boy. And yes, I was very talented.’

‘But you’re so old now!’ protested Kate.

Mr Mitchell’s smile faded slightly. ‘Perhaps, perhaps I am.’ He sat down on a rock. ‘My old limbs feel the cold so. But look at this!’ Milo flung an arm around at the world. ‘This is the day I made Summer Fall.’

He patted the rocks. ‘Come, sit down. I’ll tell you.’ He paused.

They sat down, and Mr Mitchell started to speak. Kate decided he rather liked being the centre of attention.

‘It’s a lovely story. When I was young, I was always painting, painting, painting. I used to paint on things I found washed up on the beach – driftwood, sides of tea chests, normally. But then, one day, I was out with friends and we found something on the shore – a sort of canvas or gabardine, but like tin foil. It felt strange to the touch. There was nothing else to hand, so I sat in Skull Cove and I painted on the sheet.

‘It was the end of summer, but I imagined how the town had looked in winter. My friends danced around me, ignoring me, chasing each other. Until their cries silenced. And I realised that it had started to snow. In August. The more I painted, the more the snow fell. At first my friends were

delighted – then they were frightened. I stopped painting, but it carried on snowing. I tried rubbing the painting out, but it still snowed. Until the whole town had frozen over and the world stopped. Empty apart from my friends and I.

‘That was when the Lord of Winter came. He swept across the sea to us. He spoke to me then. He promised me I could live in that day forever. And I stepped forward to agree – but some of my friends stopped me. They were just girls.’

Kate frowned

‘But,’ Mr Mitchell went on, ‘they were strange girls from old families. They shouted at the sky, used strange words, and the more they spoke, the angrier the Lord of Winter became. They hacked at the canvas, the three of them. One tore off a strip and wore it as a band. The other fashioned the foil into a key. The third seized the picture. I tried to grab at them, but the wind howled, and the Lord of Winter screamed... and the snow faded away and it was summer again.

‘They took my painting, the ring and the key home to their parents. The elders of the town told me that the Lord of Winter had been waiting outside the town for a very long time, and that I’d found his shield. They said I had summoned an old, dark force by accident, and I wasn’t to feel bad about it.

‘But I hated them. I painted the same picture, over and over. And nothing happened. I longed for the fall of Summer. But it never happened. A war came. All the boys went away to fight in it. But not me. I stayed here and painted. None of them ever came back, and suddenly that long ago magical day seemed more important than ever.

‘And those girls who’d stopped me, they didn’t understand – they sent me feathers and called me a coward.

‘So I went away. I fought in that terrible war. And, somehow, I survived. I’d like to think that the Lord of Winter watched over me. But I was never the same again. Childhood seemed such a long way away.

‘I moved away, and I waited. Such a long time. Until my Lord said I could come back.

‘And I was only too happy to. As a twinkling old man, running a little pharmacy. It was perfect. All those girls who’d called me names – they were old now. Old and frail. They didn’t recognise me when they came in and I handed over their medicines.’ He smiled. ‘Oh, it was ever so easy to shift the blame onto my assistant.’

‘Mr Dass!’ said Kate.

Armand flushed and looked at the ground.

‘Indeed,’ said Mr Mitchell. ‘That’s why Armand is so eager to help me. Just like his father. He is afraid I will fire him, but I’m only too happy to keep him on, only too happy. After all, he’s taken all of the blame for my crimes.’

Armand glared at Mr Mitchell. It was a look of bitter hatred. The old man just laughed.

‘We have an understanding.’

Kate found Mr Mitchell baffling, even for an adult. ‘So you killed your friends?’

‘Happily. They’d ruined my fun. And they sent me feathers...’ His voice took on a childish tone. ‘I had to get my painting back, didn’t I? I didn’t know who had it, but it was bound to turn up – after they’d gone. Still, all done now.’ Mr Mitchell smiled brightly, as if he was dismissing a mildly disagreeable trip to the dentist.

‘What happens next?’ asked Kate.

Mr Mitchell sat back on the rock. ‘We have to find that key. Once we have, the shield will be

complete, and the Lord of Winter can rule forever!’

‘But why?’ asked Kate. ‘I mean, you’ve explained your plan very neatly. But what is in it for me? At the moment, nothing.’

‘But, don’t you want to be my friends?’ Mr Mitchell looked surprised. ‘We can stay here and be children always. It’s peaceful. It’s beautiful. There are no grown-ups telling you what to do. And what would you rather have it be? Choose Kate – the last week of the school holidays or a Christmas day forever?’

‘It’s not my decision,’ said Kate.

‘Oh, but I’d like you to have a say, both of you,’ Mr Mitchell adopted a cajoling tone. ‘You’ve helped me. You brought the Lord of Winter back. You’ve made all this.’

Strictly speaking, Kate thought, a cat did all this, but she doubted that was helping.

‘Sure,’ she said, and then, ‘All right.’ A pause. ‘Right then. Big decision.’

‘Yes?’ Mr Mitchell looked like there wasn’t much contest.

The pause hung in the air. Armand did not meet her eyes.

‘Tell you what,’ said Kate, ‘I’ll get back to you.’

And she ran away.

Kate looked over her shoulder. For a moment, it seemed as though Armand would follow her. But he stood his ground.

So, she was in trouble and on her own. Normally she despaired of grown-ups. They were lazy, or messy, or rude or unhelpful. But right now, she really very much wanted a grown-up. She wanted to run back to the house and find her mother, and cry until her mother gave her a hug and got her a hot water bottle and put a tin of beans on the stove. Her mother’s drawbacks as a cook were normally a source of some irritation to Kate. Kate had made it her business to learn at an early age the secret of omelettes, soufflés and roasts. But right now she wanted very much a plate of her mother’s lukewarm beans on cold toast.

She ran on along the cliff face, feeling the wind salty on her face – and then she realised. They were her tears. This was no good. She needed to change tactic. She crouched down behind a gorse bush at the cliff edge and watched. There was no sign of Armand or of Mr Mitchell. But they were somewhere between her and town. And, if she was going to get an advantage, she needed to get past them. She needed to find that key.

Right now, she was stuck. She needed a way to get past them. An alternative.

Kate thought about it, frowning until an idea was pressed into being. If she could climb down to the beach, she could go round the boys simply by making her way across the frozen sea.

There were at least two disadvantages to this that she could think of, but it seemed like a good enough plan.

Kate pushed herself over the headland, took her gloves off to improve her grip, and started to clamber down the rocks. All went well for the first few handholds, and then she stopped.

New problems presented themselves. It was growing dark, and she couldn’t really see beneath her. It was so cold her hands were numb and slipping against the snow. She was far enough down that clambering back up seemed an impossibility, but going on seemed even worse.

She slithered down another few feet, her shoes resting on a narrow ledge that criss-crossed the slope. She heard a light skittering of stones as she shifted her weight onto the ledge.

Kate breathed out quietly. So far, so good. If she kept this up, she would —

The ledge gave way, and Kate slipped down the cliff face.

Her legs kicked out helplessly, finding nothing to grip against. In desperation, one hand grabbed another of the little ledges, and somehow held, jerking the rest of her body with a painful snap.

Kate gasped and then gasped again. She threw another hand onto the ledge, and then, gingerly, tapped her feet along the rocks until one foot found purchase.

She was very, very frightened. She was cold. She was miserable. She was about to fall.

Chapter

7

Kate hung helplessly from the side of the cliff.

And then something tutted.

A small furry head poked over the side of the ledge, stared at her unblinkingly, and then nuzzled her grazed hand.

‘Hmm,’ said the grey cat. ‘How funny.’

‘It is not funny,’ Kate grizzled, voice thick with tears.

‘It is from where I’m sitting,’ replied the cat.

‘Help me,’ she begged.

The grey cat shrugged. ‘Sure,’ it offered. ‘Are you hungry? If so, there’s a little nest of voles just over there. I could get you one if you want.’

‘No,’ Kate said tightly. ‘No, thank you.’

‘Oh, but I insist. I won’t hear another word.’ The cat trotted away.

Kate reflected. Her miserable situation was about to made worse by having vermin dropped on her. She cast around for a lower foothold. It was now so dark she was doing this by feel alone. But what if she simply found a clump of mud and put her entire weight on that? Would the fall kill her? She risked a glance to see how high up she was, and wished she hadn’t.

Something small and brown tumbled squeaking past her.

‘Oops.’ The cat’s face appeared over the ledge. ‘You missed it. Not to worry. I’ll get you another. Just try and catch better this time.’

‘No!’ Kate shouted at the cat. ‘I’m stuck. I can’t see a way down. I’m in terrible danger. It’s hopeless. Help me.’

Barnabas’s cat considered her, unblinkingly. It looked about to say something and then stuck a paw up and cleaned it thoroughly.

‘Goodness me,’ it said eventually. ‘You people do get yourselves in such messes.’

‘Please!’ Kate was painfully aware of how tired her hands were.

‘Tricky,’ said the cat. And vanished.

Kate clung to the side of the rock. She was starting to shake – whether from cold or fear, she didn’t know.

Something brushed against her leg. She glanced down.

It was the cat. Rubbing against her ankle.

‘You silly food-bringer,’ it said. ‘There’s a perfectly good ledge here.’

‘I couldn’t see it,’ Kate protested, shifting her feet onto it gratefully.

‘I know,’ sighed the cat. ‘Humans have such limited eyesight. A little hunting would help you no end. Put your hand there. And – ah yes – there.’

With the cat’s help, Kate clambered and slid down the slope, at last feeling her boot crunch into the snow. The cat weaved around her feet.

‘That took such a long time,’ it yawned. ‘I have things to do.’

‘Do you now?’ Kate scratched it between the ears.

‘Oh, all right, then,’ it purred. ‘I’ve got time enough for a little fuss.’

‘Don’t leave me,’ she told the cat. ‘I could do with the company.’

‘Hmm.’ The cat closed both of its eyes. ‘Will there be biscuits at the end of it?’

‘Yes. If I can find any.’

‘And warmth?’

‘Yes. I’m going to try and get summer back.’

The cat opened an eye. ‘And will there be hunting?’

‘Oh, absolutely,’ said Kate. ‘The biggest hunt I’ve ever been on.’

‘It’s a deal.’

Kate made for the sea, but the cat stopped her.

‘Not that way,’ it said. ‘There’s something I want to show you.’

It led her to the back of the tiny cove, springing from rock to rock until it brought her to a single stone, alone and tall at the front of the beach, just proud of the cliff.

‘They call this the Frozen Witch,’ the cat said. ‘When the tide is high, they talk about the Witch being blind.’

Kate shuddered. ‘Was it a real witch, once?’

‘They say she was the first to stop the Lord of Winter.’ The cat rubbed against the stone.

‘The Cold Lady!’ Kate cried, remembering the poem. ‘Something about her eyes being opened – like now, when the sea is frozen. The key’s hidden here.’

‘Ah,’ said the cat. ‘Come here...’

It led her around the back of the Frozen Witch. There was a thin crack in the rock wall. It led into another cave.

‘Hurry,’ said the cat. ‘There’s someone waiting for us in here.’

‘What?’ Kate was alarmed.

‘Oh, don’t worry. Fairly sure he doesn’t want to eat you.’ It sniffed the air. ‘He doesn’t smell hungry.’

They edged through the narrow dankness. It was almost completely dark now, and their path was almost totally obscured.

‘You’ll have to guide me,’ said Kate, feeling her way with her fingertips.

‘Honestly,’ sighed the cat. ‘Must I do everything?’

But it led her on. The way narrowed until Kate thought she’d have to give up. The cave walls pressed in around her.

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘I can still hear the sound of the sea in here. Funny that.’

The cat did not reply.

At the very narrowest point, the cave suddenly opened out. She squeezed through into a vast, dark space. Her footsteps echoed and crunched.

‘Hello...?’ she called out. Her voice echoed back.

And then, all of a sudden —

A match was struck.

A face loomed out at her.

Chapter

8

‘Hello you!’

It was Barnabas, the museum curator. His voice was muffled.

‘Oh!’ Kate exclaimed. ‘You took your time getting here.’

‘And you’re a very ungrateful girl.’ Again Barnabas’s voice was muffled.

‘You’re just in time, though,’ she said. ‘We’re in terrible danger.’

‘Well,’ Barnabas sounded regretful. ‘I’d love to help, but my hands are tied. Literally.’

‘What?’

‘A little boy hit me over the head and tied me up.’ Barnabas sounded quite resentful. ‘He seemed quite nice too.’

Kate went over to him, and started at the ropes holding him. ‘I’ve never been any good with knots,’ she said.

‘Just try your best. He did gag me as well, but I’ve managed to do a little about that,’ Barnabas said.

Kate worked, marvelling at how long the Curator’s match burned. It was clamped in his hands and gave her just enough light to see how to undo the knots.

‘No good,’ sighed Kate, and started reaching around for a stone or something to cut the ropes. Instead her hand closed on something cold and metal. Perhaps a rusty fork left behind by a picnicker. She hacked away at the Curator’s bonds with it.

Then she stopped.

‘Carry on!’ Barnabas urged.

‘But,’ protested Kate, ‘it’s the key! This is it!’ She held it up. It glinted bronze by the light of the match.

‘Coo,’ said the Curator.

‘So that’s what the poem meant about the Cold Lady.’

‘I did wonder,’ Barnabas said.

‘I don’t know if it is a key after all. More like an arrow,’ Kate considered.

‘Hmm,’ agreed Barnabas. He stroked it with a hand. ‘Feels funny... From the same bit of material. Well, well done.’

The cat climbed up the cave and dangled its tail in Barnabas’s face. ‘Geroff,’ murmured Barnabas.

‘Shan’t,’ said the cat, and turned around three times on the Curator’s head before settling down to sleep.

Kate sawed steadily through Barnabas’s bonds with the key and took the gag off. She regarded him.

‘Was it you – about an hour ago?’ she asked.

‘What? In the cave? Yes. I was gagged. I was trying to warn you about the dog.’

‘Ah,’ said Kate. ‘What were you doing in the cave?’

‘Um,’ said Barnabas. ‘I was scrambled. I came looking for you, and I met this charming little tyke.’

He asked me to look at something he'd seen in a cave and THUD!'

'That,' Kate said crossly, 'was Milo. He's really Milo Mitchell. And also Mr Stevens, the pharmacist.'

'Really?' Barnabas looked interested. 'And he's been wandering around here as a little boy?'

'Yes,' Kate sounded cross. 'Which is impossible. And therefore wrong.'

'Not necessarily. Strange things have been happening here for a long time.' Barnabas lifted the cat off his head and slung it over his shoulder. He started to crunch across the stones, leading them out into Skull Cove. 'We've a lot to do in a very short time, and I shouldn't let a bit of magic worry you.'

'Magic?' Kate snorted. 'There's no such thing. Is there?'

'Magic?' Barnabas shrugged. 'Why not? Magic is cool.'

'But there has to be a rational explanation.'

'Oh there is,' Barnabas led her out of the cave and back to the shore. The frozen sea stretched before them. 'But a rational explanation is rather complex. We're dealing with a psycho-temporal entity manifesting through a critical mass of its sentient shell... um. Magic sounds more fun.'

'You have a talking cat,' Kate pointed out. 'There's no logical explanation for that.'

The grey cat yawned. 'Yes there is. I've been spending too much time sleeping in his shed,' it said.

'There we are then,' said Barnabas. 'Magic. Now then, let's walk on the sea.'

He took her hand and the two of them stepped onto the waves.

Chapter

9

Kate considered walking on the sea to be an entirely curious experience. It was just as slippery as skating on a frozen lake, but made harder by the frozen waves – forcing them to clamber and slide. The grey cat trotted along beside them, springing from one crest to the next.

‘The good thing about this,’ grunted Barnabas, ‘is that it gives us cover from the town.’

‘The bad thing,’ Kate winced, grazing her shin on a frozen starfish, ‘is that it’s quite slow.’

‘Yes.’

‘We still have to get the painting.’

The Curator smiled at that. ‘The important thing is the key. That can either stabilise or banish the Lord of Winter.’

‘If only we knew how.’ Kate looked at the lowering sky.

‘Oh yes,’ Barnabas agreed. ‘Tricky that.’

They trudged on, inching towards the harbour. Behind them, the giant frozen waves shivered, and the sky grew darker. The creaking increased.

‘We are running out of time,’ said Barnabas. ‘The Lord of Winter is coming.’

‘But what is the Lord of Winter? In English.’

Barnabas considered. ‘The memory of something old and powerful that shouldn’t be here. And wasn’t. Until Mr Mitchell found its shield. And the shield remembered its owner and brought him back to life.’

‘Is that possible?’

‘Magically? Yes.’ The Curator grinned. ‘And we’re going to use the same magic to defeat it before it’s too late.’

There was a loud groan behind them. In the distance, giant waves grew dark and shattered as the great shadow swallowed them.

‘I think,’ announced Kate, ‘that now may be too late.’

‘This’ll be fun,’ said the cat.

They broke into a run.

As they ran, the sea shivered and shuddered. In the distance, vast towers of ice toppled and fragmented, ruins skittering across the splintering waves. The cinereous sky pressed in around them.

The darkness was at their backs, and the harbour seemed no closer.

Behind them came a sound like giant’s footsteps, and the ice shook and cracked, sheets of it rearing up like behemoths.

Kate made a list of things she liked about this. It was a very short list. She just kept staring at Barnabas’s heels. She made herself keep going.

A crack jagged across the sea in front of her, a sudden pit that she toppled into.

The Curator spun round, shot out a hand, and pulled her across the chasm.

‘It feels...’ she gasped, ‘like the end of the world.’

Barnabas grinned. ‘I know! The fun bit.’

They ran from the chaos towards the harbour steps. Around them the boats creaked, buckling under the tearing ice. The wind chittered through the masts.

Another chasm zagged open in front of them. The cat leapt over it. Barnabas picked up Kate and tossed her across, her legs slipping on the ice on the other side. As she landed, she heard a yell behind her, and turned in time to see Barnabas vanishing down the hole. The ice closed around him, jaws clamping around his body. Kate ran back to him, but he waved her away. ‘No time!’ he gasped, as the sea pressed in. ‘Get on.’

‘But...’

‘I’ll be fine,’ he said. Kate did not think that he looked fine, but sometimes adults said things that were not true.

She turned towards the lighthouse and ran. The cat hesitated, uncertain whether it was more interested in her, or in Barnabas slowly vanishing beneath the frozen waves. Then it followed her.

Kate edged up the harbour steps as quickly as she could, ignoring the lack of a handrail, ignoring the dizzying drop to the ice below. The cat trotted easily behind her.

‘Well, there you are,’ said a voice. ‘We’ve been waiting.’

Standing by the lighthouse was Mr Mitchell and a snarling Brewster. At their side was a cowed-looking Armand.

Kate considered what to do or say, and used a trick of her mother’s – she only acknowledged the person she found least annoying.

‘Hello Armand,’ she said. ‘You look cold.’

Armand nodded miserably.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Kate. ‘It’s not too late.’

Mr Mitchell, annoyed at being ignored, laughed loudly. ‘Hah!’ he snarled. ‘Happily it is, I tell you it is. I’ve summoned him and he’s coming. Look!’

He pointed up to the sky. And there, pouring out of it, from the horizon, from the sea, was the Lord of Winter.

Chapter

10

Later, Kate tried to describe the Lord of Winter. She couldn't. Or at least, she couldn't without the urge to run from the room and scream. In the end she made a list.

Big.

Dark.

Claws.

Eyes.

Lots of Eyes.

'Wowser,' hissed the cat.

The Lord of Winter spoke, like ice splintering, or the wind on the coldest day. 'You called and I came,' it said. 'Who summoned me?'

'I did!' said Mr Mitchell. 'I want it to be the perfect day for ever.'

'And so it shall be,' the voice promised. 'I give you winter.'

Mr Mitchell smiled. It was not a nice smile.

'Wait a minute,' Kate's voice cut across the storm. She shouted, stopping the wind from snatching her words away. 'Excuse me,' she said, 'I think you'll find that I summoned you, actually.'

'That's a lie!' protested Mr Mitchell.

'No it isn't,' Kate spoke hotly. 'Mr Mitchell may have wanted to, but I did it – I just didn't intend to, that's all. It was more of an... accident.'

The whole sky frowned. The many, many eyes turned to Mr Mitchell.

'Then I am afraid,' it boomed, 'the decision is yours no longer.'

'No,' cried Mr Mitchell. 'I possess two of the three. Surely—'

'The girl summoned me. And she carries the key. That which governs the others.' The Lord of Winter sounded impatient. 'We should abide by the rules.'

'Rules?' Kate pulled out the key and waved it at Mr Mitchell. 'See?' she said.

Mr Mitchell made to snatch it.

Armand blocked his way, gripping his hand. 'No,' he said. 'It's Kate's decision. Let her decide.'

Mr Mitchell knocked him to the ground. Armand grabbed him, and the old man and the boy rolled in the snow. Kate stepped quickly forwards and stared into the sky. The sky stared back at her.

'Well,' demanded the Lord of Winter. 'There is not long. What is it to be?'

'Firstly,' said Kate, 'what's in it for you?'

'Honestly?' The sky laughed. 'I have drifted for so long. Now I shall have a home.'

'I see,' she said eventually. 'Then what is in it for me?'

'Give me the world... and I will give you this town and this day, and you can enjoy it always. You won't grow old, or grow up. The snow will always fall. You'll have no cares. It will always be

perfect.’

‘What about my mother?’ Kate asked.

Hundreds of eyes narrowed a little. ‘Would you miss her?’

‘Well...’ Kate found herself considering the question. It was an interesting one. All her mother did was sleep and be cooked for. Without her, Kate would have a lot less tidying up to do. She glanced at the snow-covered town. It was all so peacefully neat. Like someone had taken the real world and added a lot of straight lines and blank pages.

Actually, she rather liked it.

Mr Mitchell stood up. ‘Ha!’ he gloated. ‘I knew you’d come round.’

‘I’m thinking about it,’ Kate admitted. She turned back to the staring sky. ‘What if I refuse to let you stay?’

The voice rumbled sadly. ‘As I go, this tiny little pocket will collapse.’

Out at sea, the mountains of ice fell and tumbled.

‘You have not got long,’ prompted the voice.

‘And if I say no... well, I will be all right, won’t I?’ she said. ‘I can go home?’

‘Ah.’ The sky smiled nastily at her. ‘If I lose my hold on this world, I won’t go home empty-handed.’

‘Is that a threat?’

The sky shrugged. ‘Merely a possibility.’ It paused. ‘Place the three objects together, and my shield will be complete. I can step into this world. And then there will be perfect order. For ever.’

‘Or...?’

‘Turn the key in its lock and we will fall together.’

‘Where is the lock?’

‘I need hardly tell you that,’ coaxed the Lord of Winter. ‘You won’t need it.’

‘No,’ admitted Kate. ‘No, I won’t.’

Kate took a deep breath. The snow drifted down, the sea continued to crumble, and Armand and Mr Mitchell looked on. Armand looked worried. Mr Mitchell looked triumphant.

This was the moment.

There was a polite little cough.

‘Made up your mind?’ asked the grey cat. ‘Only, you’re running out of time.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Kate. And ran forward.

Kate hurled herself at the steps up to the lighthouse. Behind her she heard Mr Mitchell’s shout of anger. He let go of Brewster’s leash.

Kate raced up the spiral stairs around the lighthouse, skidding and slipping against the iced metal. Her hands wouldn’t grip on the frozen handrail. Behind her the hound growled at her feet.

To start with it made her climb faster and faster. But then she ran out of breath. And still the dog bounded up the steps, ironwork echoing its thundering gait. Snarling as it got closer.

She took another step before the animal pounced. Its jaws snapped at her face. She backed away, pressing against the railing. She threw her arms up, fighting to keep her balance. The dog snarled and leapt again.

She could hear her screams. She could hear the dog’s hatred.

But worse, she could hear the Lord of Winter laughing.

It was a long way down. A long way up to the distant glow of the lamp at the top of the lighthouse. She was petrified and the dog showed no signs of giving up. She flailed out with the key, but the dog simply seized on it like a stick, tugging it away from her. She knew she'd made a mistake and didn't dare let go.

Nor did she dare push back as the dog's jaws worried at the key, jerking her off balance. Kate suddenly felt very small and alone.

She could see Mr Mitchell, his face triumphant.

She could see Armand, worried and sad.

And, in the distance, out at sea, she could see Barnabas, pulling himself out of the ice, staring at her, waving and shouting. He had such a nice face, she thought. A good last thing to see.

Kate closed her eyes and got ready to fall.

Then she heard it. A screaming howl and a yap from the dog. She opened her eyes.

The grey cat was locked in a struggle with Brewster, a whirl of claws and fur. Brewster let go of the key, turning to clamp down on the cat. The cat howled, hissing and spitting at the dog. The two tore back and forth across the narrow steps.

'Hurry!' yowled the cat. 'You're running out of time...'

'But, but...' said Kate.

'Hurry!' the cat hissed, leaping up onto the handrail, then plunging onto the dog. Brewster jumped up to meet it, and the cat swiped sideways, wrapping a tail around the dog's face.

The cat landed, spun and turned, puffing itself up into a large, angry spiky greyness. It let out a wailing howl of warning. The dog gulped out breath and drool and then bounded for the cat. It smacked into it, carrying both of them over the side of the lighthouse.

Kate watched them tumble down for a second then turned away before the loud thud.

She was crying, but she carried on running.

She made the last ten steps. At the top of the lighthouse the wind was fierce, plucking at her hair and skin.

The wind grew. Out at sea the last of the mountains collapsed, melting away like ice cubes in squash. The terrible dark face of the Lord of Winter leered down at her.

'You are out of time! This little realm is nothing, a stepping stone to your home... Give me the key, little girl.'

Kate smiled at the Lord of Winter, feeling the icy breath cut into her. She stretched out her hand, thrusting the key onto the top of the little light, fitting it neatly into a slot. She turned the object. At last she saw what it was. A key, yes, an arrow, perhaps... but really it was a weathervane.

The little gold dart spun in the wind.

The lamp glowed and burned out into the world. The Lord of Winter glared at Kate with all of its many, many eyes. Then it screamed.

Light poured from its mouths and its eyes, the clouds snapped down, and the world broke apart and stopped.

Chapter

11

The world started again.

Kate was lying on the platform at the top of the lighthouse. A patch of clear blue sky burned through the clouds. The sun was warm against her frozen skin. She sat up.

Feet thundered up the metal steps and Armand ran to her, helping her up. Behind him came Barnabas, holding something in his arms. At first she thought it was a coat.

Then she realised.

It was the body of the grey cat.

‘Oh,’ said Kate.

She ran towards Barnabas. ‘Do something!’ she yelled.

He shook his head, sadly offering her the bundle in his arms.

She cradled the cat, and its eyes flickered open.

‘Ah,’ it said. ‘Hello.’ It tried to lick a paw, but gave up and blinked at her. ‘It’s nice and warm up here,’ it said. ‘Finally.’

Kate looked up. The patch of blue sky was spilling out. The clouds hurried away, almost embarrassed. A shaft of sunlight shone down, glinting off the weathervane.

‘Winter is over,’ said Barnabas sadly. ‘The sun is coming out.’

‘I see.’ The cat made a feeble effort to nudge Kate under the chin. It gave up. ‘So, this is what death feels like. I had wondered. Interesting.’ Its whiskers twitched. ‘Could you hold me up to the sunlight, please? I’d like to feel the heat.’

Kate did so, her hands stretching up as far as they could. ‘Nice,’ muttered the cat, and yawned.

‘No!’ sobbed Kate.

‘I’m afraid so,’ said the cat. ‘I am so terribly, terribly tired.’

Its eyelids flickered and steadily drew shut. The grey cat purred away to itself for a while, and then went silent.

Kate held out the still bundle until her arms ached, and then Barnabas took it gently from her.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said.

Kate wiped her nose, and then stepped to the railing. ‘Where’s Mr Mitchell?’ she demanded.

Armand pointed. Mr Mitchell stood there, defiantly on the ground.

‘Do what you like!’ he roared. ‘I’m staying here.’

Barnabas crossed over to the railing and stared down. ‘Little boys,’ he thundered, ‘should not play with toys they’re not supposed to.’

‘I am not a little boy,’ retorted Mr Mitchell, proudly.

‘Oh yes you are,’ Kate told him. ‘You grew old, but you never grew up. It’s a shame. You’ve wasted your life.’

‘Come up here,’ urged Barnabas. ‘This world is falling away and we’re going back home. The top of the lighthouse is the only bit that’s safe.’

‘Safe?’ shouted Mr Mitchell. ‘Fat chance. I’m staying here.’

‘You can’t!’ said Kate. ‘There’s still time! The Lord of Winter has gone. Summer is coming back.’

‘I don’t believe you.’ Mr Mitchell was defiant. ‘I’ll be young again! He can’t be defeated by a stupid girl.’

At that point, Kate decided she really didn’t care what happened to him.

‘I’m staying,’ shouted Mr Mitchell.

As he spoke, figures sprang up across the sea. Ghostly figures with young faces. They were in uniform and they were marching silently towards the shore.

‘You see?’ laughed Milo. ‘They’re all coming back home. All my friends. We’re all going to be young forever! I finally get what I want.’

As he spoke, a crack echoed across the sea. The ghostly figures vanished as the sea split apart, water pouring up from a zigzag, icebergs crashing down towards the harbour. The walls shook under the impact and the lighthouse lurched at an alarming angle. Actually, thought Kate, if you’re standing on top of a lighthouse, any angle that isn’t perpendicular is alarming.

‘Quickly!’ yelled Barnabas. ‘Grab on to a railing! It’s about to get very exciting.’

The lighthouse tipped, falling up into the sun which was suddenly coming towards them very fast.

Chapter

12

The town woke up to a glorious late summer day. At first no one noticed anything amiss. True, over the next few days, keen gardeners were surprised at the early appearance of snowdrops and daffodils.

But no one said anything much. Town gossip was consumed by the surprise disappearance of the pharmacist. At first, many fingers were pointed at Mr Dass, but then, when a constable cycled over from Minehead, a lot of interesting things were found in the storeroom at the back. Suddenly, sheepish men were trying very hard to be nice to Armand's father, while sour-faced ladies said of Mr Mitchell that They Had Always Known.

It was the last Sunday afternoon of summer. Kate had just finished helping her mother string up a hammock in the garden. ('Well, dear, it has such a nice view,' her mother had said, before shutting her eyes and falling asleep.)

Armand stuck his head over the hedge. 'Hello,' he said.

Kate waved back.

'It doesn't seem real,' he said. 'There really will be school tomorrow.'

'I know,' Kate laughed. 'Just think. If it wasn't for me, there'd never be school ever again. Oh.' She frowned. 'I wish I hadn't said that out loud.'

'It might not be that bad,' Armand suggested. 'People might actually talk to me this term. Now they no longer think my father's a poisoner.'

'True,' admitted Kate. 'Puts my problems into perspective. I'll add that to the list.'

'Do that,' said Armand. 'If it helps.'

They stood, looking at each other for a minute.

'It's a nice afternoon,' said Armand. 'We could do something. You know, have a proper nose round the museum. Something pointless and unplanned.'

Kate smiled. 'Yes,' she said. 'I'd like that.'

'Well, only if it's open.'

'I'll go and ask Barnabas.' Kate hadn't seen the Curator for days. He'd been out.

She ran to the side of the garden, past her gently snoring mother, and squeezed herself through the hedge.

Barnabas's garden was empty, grass baking in the afternoon sunshine. The grand old house was quiet. She went round to the back of it, and noticed the candy-striped tent still there. A flap was open. She pulled it back and peeped inside.

The small tent was empty, but a smell hung in the air. The smell of earth after rain. She sniffed and, somehow, oddly, she knew that she would never see the mysterious Barnabas ever again.

She stepped out of the tent, and something moved in the corner of her eye. She turned, just in time to glimpse a cat's tail vanish into the hedge. It was grey.

Heart beating, she made to go after it, but then the bell on Armand's bicycle called to her. She ran down the garden path into the lane.

‘Come on,’ she said. ‘We’ve only got an afternoon left. Let’s make the most of it.’

And they did.

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SUMMER FALLS